

IS A PET SKUNK RIGHT FOR YOU?

Are you considering getting a domestic skunk as a pet? They are certainly cute and adorable aren't they? Babies especially, will tug at your heartstrings and they know all the right things to do to get you to take them home with you. It is time to make your decision whether adding a skunk is the right choice. Make your choice carefully whether you want to add a baby skunk, which requires more care and training vs. a slightly older rescued skunk that has already gone through the “baby” stage. Our goal is to give you the tools necessary to make the right decision. Only you can decide if a domestic skunk is right for you, your family and the skunk.

Here are a few basic facts about the domestic skunk:

* Domestic Skunks are native to the North and South American continents.
* The Domestic Striped Skunk is a member of the genus Mephitis mephitis.

 If trained properly as babies, they are very affectionate pets.

* The average life span is 8 to 12 years, but some live longer.
* They can live with children if the children are responsible and old enough to know how to handle a pet properly and not leave doors open allowing the skunk to escape.
* Skunks may or may not get along with your other animals. Be careful not to set up a "food chain" and allow your skunk unsupervised around animals that might be harmed or killed or that could harm or kill your skunk.
* Skunks have no body odor if healthy and fed properly.

 Skunks shed their coats once or twice a year.

 Skunks need a calm environment. Noises startle them.

* The breeding season for skunks begins in late February. Gestation usually lasts 7 to 10 weeks. The babies are born in early May. There is usually only one litter per year. Litters are usually 4 to 6 but may be 2 to 16.
* Domestic skunks do not go into full hibernation, but some do get less active in the winter months. They are nocturnal by habit but get used to your schedule and are more active during the time you are active.
* Skunks are not born with rabies, but there is currently no rabies vaccine approved for skunks. Because of this, if any skunk bites a human and it is reported, even a pet skunk, the skunk must be put to sleep and the head removed to be tested for rabies. There are new ways to test for rabies that do not involve killing the pet but they are in limited use.
* If you are required to have a permit to own a skunk, it can take as long as 6 weeks to receive your permit during busy times. In Florida, a permit is required.
* When you get your baby skunk from a breeder or pet shop, it will be descented, but not spayed or neutered. This should be done no sooner than 4 months for males and 5 months for females but if your skunk is under 4 lbs. in weight then you should wait longer before having them fixed. If you get a slightly older skunk from the Florida Skunk Rescue, it will already be spayed or neutered.
* Skunks can have distemper vaccinations but some vets are not recommending them as many skunks have had adverse reactions to the vaccine and a few have even died.
* Skunks require de-worming on a regular basis
* Some household cleaners can be toxic to your skunks and can even kill them. Try to use natural products whenever possible, as they are safer for all pets.
* Skunks should never be de-clawed!

Skunks were first bred in captivity for the fur industry. Once truth in labeling laws began being strictly enforced and skunk pelts were labeled for what they were, the demand went down tremendously. Fur farms that were once selling them for fur began selling their stock as pets and the domestic skunk trade was started.

Domestic skunks come in a variety of colors besides the classic black and white. Colors such as brown, apricot, champagne, mahogany, smoke, confetti, and even lavender make it easier for people to own a pet skunk in states that outlaw having a black and white skunk for a pet, but some do allow other colors.

Domestic skunks can be excellent pets under the proper conditions. When acquiring any new pet, it is necessary to get as much information about that pet before you purchase or adopt it. You want to insure that the pet is suitable for your situation and that proper care can be given. Remember, responsible pet ownership begins with the needs and wants of the animal, not the owner.

Before deciding whether a domestic skunk is the pet for you, there are many factors to consider. A few of those that will be discussed in greater detail later are, legality, veterinary care, costs, proper environment, future plans, children, and other pets.

The education about domestic skunks never ends. Responsible skunk owners are always searching for new and better ways for the best possible care for domestic skunks. There is very little research that has been done on domestic skunks, so a lot of information we have is from actual personal experiences of fellow domestic skunk owners and their veterinarians.

Domestic skunk owners are a supportive group and ready to help fellow owners with any questions. There are domestic skunk organizations in various locations across the country that have websites. A good sense of humor and a lot of patience is important when living with a skunk.

The first thing you should do when considering a domestic skunk as a pet is to check into the laws of your state. Do you live in a state that allows skunks to be owners as pets? Laws are determined by each State individually and vary from one State to another. Once it is determined you can legally keep a pet skunk in your State, you then have to check with the county or your city. It is possible to live in a legal State, but your county or city could have a law or ordinance against pet skunk ownership. If your State allows you to have a pet skunk but requires a permit, you should apply for your permit in advance so there is enough time to have it in your possession before getting your skunk. It is never advised to have a skunk in an illegal situation. Keeping a skunk illegally will put your skunk’s life in jeopardy and could subject you to criminal prosecution. Be sure to give your veterinarian a copy of your permit.

Laws are constantly changing. States can change their laws from skunks being legal one year, and illegal the next. For this reason, although you may have checked the previous year on legalities of skunk ownership, never assume it is still the same. Always check with your State before getting your skunk. In some cases when an illegally kept skunk is seized, they will euthanize the skunk rather than try to care for it or find a legal home like a zoo or wildlife center. Because the skunk is descented, it cannot be released back into the wild. None of these alternatives is good for a skunk used to being in a loving home. If you live in an illegal area, a pet skunk is not the right pet for you.

As of the date this paper was written, there are no approved rabies vaccine or quarantine period in the United States for domestic skunks. For this reason, if your skunk bites someone, even you, and it is reported, your pet skunk will be euthanized to test for rabies. As mentioned previously, although there are other types of tests for rabies, they are not widely accepted as reliable and most officials will still insist on the brain being tested. In the case of a bite, it does not matter if your skunk is living in a legal situation or illegal situation. You should be extremely careful whom you allow to touch your skunk. Close friends, and even family members can, and have, reported skunk bites, even knowing there is no way the pet skunk could have contracted rabies.

Finding a veterinarian that can properly take care of your domestic skunk should be a top priority. Do you have or know of a veterinarian in your area that is willing to care for your skunk? If can be a challenge to find a good “skunk vet” and sometimes it may be necessary to travel a bit to get one. Does this veterinarian have experience treating skunks? Having a vet that knows skunks is important, and can mean the difference between a healthy, happy skunk, and one that does not thrive as well. It is best to have one that is familiar with skunks and is willing to correspond with other qualified vets. Skunk metabolisms and needs differ from other pets they are accustomed to treating.

You should meet the vet in person and always ask the question, “what is your policy if my skunk bites you or a staff member”. If the answer is the bite will be reported, leave immediately and find another vet. This could mean the difference of life or death for your skunk. We do not recommend using all Blue Pearl Veterinary offices as they have reported a skunk bite because the allowed a vet tech not up to date on their vaccinations to handle a sick skunk and when that skunk nipped the tech, the euthanized the skunk. We also just had a situation with Dr. Nicholas Maldonado at Animal Care Center of Pasco County. He had a skunk come in to be neutered and while the skunk was recovering from anesthesia in a cage, a worker stuck her hand in the cage, startling the skunk and the skunk nipped her. Animal Control was called and the skunk euthanized, through no fault of its own, to test for rabies, which was negative.

Thought should be given about whether your home is the proper environment to for a skunk. All members of the household should be equally eager and excited about the new “baby”. Having a skunk in your household will require changes to your lifestyle and everyone should be willing and ready to make the changes required to raise a happy, healthy skunk.

Do you have children in your home? Skunks need to be carefully supervised around children. Small children especially do not always understand how to properly handle animals. The animal or the child could easily get hurt. Baby skunks have to be taught not to bite or your child could easily wind up with a nasty bite. It is also possible that the child could react out of fear or pain and hurt the skunk. It is probably a better idea to wait on getting a skunk until children are of an older age and better understand the handling and care of a skunk.

Do you have other pets in your home that would be sharing space with your skunk? Many times skunks get along great with other household pets, but there are instances where that does not happen. As with any species of animal, a lot depends on the personality of each individual pet. Never put any pet in a "food chain" situation. Skunks are predatory animals and prey animals should not be forced to live together with predators. Lives can be lost quickly, either on purpose or by complete accident. Be prepared if necessary, to keep animals completely separated. The most common questions we get are whether skunks can get along with dogs, cats or ferrets. The answer is to always supervise your pets and never leave them alone together. There have been instances of the most loving and trusted dogs attacking a skunk while the owner was away. I also know of some skunks and ferrets that get along, but it is not recommended to let them free roam together unsupervised. Ferrets and skunks are natural enemies in the wild.

Domestic skunks require a lot of time and patience. Babies require more. Time and attention are needed to mold them into bonded, friendly, loving pets. Babies need constant supervision, holding, cuddling and handling. A skunk left alone and confined, not receiving proper attention on a daily basis can become aggressive and difficult to handle. A healthy skunk gets lots of exercise. An inactive skunk can become overweight. Obesity is the number one killer of skunks. An overweight skunk becomes susceptible to a variety of health problems. Household routines may need to be adjusted to ensure your skunk gets the proper amount of exercise. The amount of quality time you spend with your skunk will reflect greatly on your skunk’s personality.

You need to have enough space for a skunk. A skunk confined continuously to a small area or a cage can become restless, want to sleep all day or become aggressive. Skunks need room to roam to keep the mind active and to receive the proper exercise. They are curious animals that need and desire to be out exploring and to have the warm feeling of being part of a family. You should open up as much of your house as possible to them.

Skunks can climb especially baby skunks. Most skunks lose the desire to climb once they reach 1 year old but that does not mean they will not try if there is something out of reach that they decide they want like food. You will need to put some things out of reach and possibly even out of sight or smell. Many skunks can climb onto couches, chairs, beds, over baby gates and occasionally have been known to make it onto kitchen tables and counters.

Skunks can also be small enough to hide in places that you would never expect to find them. You need to make sure they cannot get behind washers and dryers, refrigerators, dishwashers, under sofas, and any other place that it could be difficult to retrieve them. They are excellent at opening cabinets, so special latches may need to be installed. The magnetic childproof locks are highly recommended.

They are even able to open refrigerator doors especially on the double door refrigerators. So far, they have not been able to open the doors on my new refrigerator with the freezer on the bottom but I have to be extremely careful, as there is enough space for them to squeeze behind the freezer drawers when they are open. If you have a freezer like this, look behind the drawers before shutting them to make sure a skunk hasn’t climbed behind them. We had a friend lose her skunk this way as she forgot to tell her company about the freezer and she found the skunk the next morning frozen to death.

Skunks need space to roam and it is a huge responsibility to keep them safe from things that could harm them. If you become unable to care for your skunk for a day, a week, or even a month, you need someone to care for your skunk during this time. This may not be as easy as it sounds. A good skunk sitter needs to know a lot about caring for your baby. If you run into this problem, do not hesitate to contact us at the Florida Skunk Rescue and we will be glad to help however we can.

You should be financially prepared to handle a skunk. Outside the normal costs of food, bedding, litter and other necessities are the veterinary bills. Depending on your skunk, wellness examinations may need to be done once or twice a year. You may also need to travel to a vet for a medical solution, which your own vet cannot handle. We all hope for long and healthy lives for our skunks, but you have to be prepared for just about anything. As of this writing, Pet Insurance does not cover pet skunks.

Skunks can be potty trained but depending on your skunk, it might not be the easiest thing to do. Skunks do their dirty work in corners. Your skunk will definitely let you know which corners are preferred for litter boxes. One litter box will not be enough and it may take several spaced throughout your home to satisfy your skunk’s needs. Be prepared in your attempt to change the mind of your skunk on the choice of corners. This is one battle you may or may not win. Eventually, you will come to a mutual understanding.

The most important thing in caring for a skunk is to insure they receive a proper diet. Unfortunately, there are no healthy pre-packaged foods, kibble, or shortcuts available except for STOMP sold by Just Skunks. They need to be fed precise amounts and types of foods to keep them in good health. A skunk’s stomach does not have a shut off switch to tell it when it is full. For this reason, you need to be very aware of how much food your skunk is consuming in a day otherwise you can end up with a very fat obese skunk. When feeding you need to keep in mind that an adult skunk’s stomach is only about the size of a half dollar. Just like people, once the weight is on it takes a big effort and strict diet control to get them to take off the weight. Make sure all family members know not to feed the skunk snacks constantly. Skunks are very cleaver at begging from one person to another.

Since the domestic skunk just made the leap from wild into the home in such a short period, their diet should mimic as best as possible the diet that they would have eaten in the wild. Feral skunks consume a wide variety of foods. In particular, they eat beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, and are fond of caterpillars. In summer, they eat some fruit, rodents, and eggs. As colder months approach, they eat leaves, nuts, and carrion. Therefore, your skunk’s diet should consist of fresh fruits and vegetables, and animal protein from super worms, mealworms, pinkies (a matter of choice), raw chicken necks, crickets, grasshoppers and caterpillars. The need for supplements may be determined by blood analysis. If a well balance diet is not fed, deficiencies will occur. Harm can also occur from over supplementation. You will quickly realize that your skunk is probably eating better than you do. The importance of a diet can never be stressed enough.

If you are a juvenile thinking about getting a domestic skunk as a pet, there are a few extra things you need to consider. In the State of Florida, you must be 16 years old before you apply for the permit to have a pet skunk. Your parents should be 100% supportive in your decision to have a domestic skunk as a pet. This means your parents will have to obtain the permit in their name. This would also make your parents responsible for any action your domestic pet skunk may take. In addition, they may one day become the primary caretaker of the skunk depending on your life choices after high school. Your parents are also the ones that will be buying the food, cleaning supplies and paying the vet bills. They are the ones that will be making the most changes in the way the house is cleaned and what products are used.

A juvenile considering a domestic skunk as a pet is probably in high school or of an age where there are many unknowns, which will affect your pet skunk. High school and after school activities can be very time consuming; and that means time away from your baby. High school is a time for your social development; offering dances and other social events you will not want to miss and these all mean time away from your skunk. Will your skunk have to be locked up in your room while you are away, or will your parents allow it to have free roam of the house and will they tend to him/her in your absence?

Many of you will want to go off to college. College is a big step in life and with it comes stress. It requires a lot of hard work and study time. There are events that are even more social in college than in high school. This all means a lot of alone time for your skunk, or you missing many activities. What happens to your skunk if your dorm does not allow pets or you go to school in a State that does not allow pet skunks? Will it be left behind at home with parents who do not love your skunk as much as you do or want to be saddled with taking care of it?

You also have to consider marriage. You really have no way to know whom you will marry years down the road. What will happen to your skunk if your mate does not want a pet skunk or is allergic? It is hard to know what the future may bring, but for your skunk’s sake, all these things need to be considered and though out before adopting a baby domestic skunk. We’ve gotten more than our fair share of rescues because a significant other didn’t want any part of a having a pet skunk or because once married the owner relocated out of State and couldn’t take their beloved pet with them. It is a lot harder to move with a pet skunk than a cat or dog.

If after reading this handout, you still want to obtain a skunk as a pet, go to [www.myfwc.com](http://www.myfwc.com). Under licenses and permits you will find the application for a Class III Captive Wildlife Permit. Until you get your skunk we recommend obtaining the free pet permit which allows you to keep your skunk in your home and take it out only to the vet. If after getting a skunk you wish to take it out in public, you can convert your permit to the $50.00 per year exhibition permit.

Once you have your permit, if you would like to adopt a skunk, go to our website [www.floridaskunkrescue.com](http://www.floridaskunkrescue.com) and fill out our adoption permit. You’ll need to be a little patient as it may take a while to get a skunk.

If you have any questions or need additional information, email us at: floridaskunkrescue@verizon.net.